THE BATTLE-CRY

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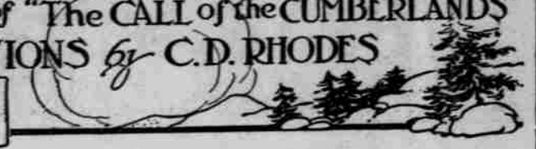

SYNOPSIS.

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Juanita Holland, a Philadelphia young woman of wealth, on her journey with her guide, Good Anse Talbott, into the heart of the Cumberlands to become a teacher of the mountain children, faints at the door of Fletch McNash's cabin. While resting there she overhears a talk between Bad Anse Havey, chief of his clan, and one of his henchmen that acquaints her with the Havey-McBriar feud. Juanita has an unprofitable talk with Bad Anse and they become antagonists. Cal Douglas of the Havey clan is on trial in Peril, for the murder of Noah Wyatt, a McBriar. In the night Juanita hears feudists ride past the McNash cabin. Juanita and Dawn McNash become friends. Cal Douglas is acquitted. Nash Wyatt attempts to kill him but is himself killed by the Haveys. Juanita goes to live with the Widow Everson, whose boys are outside the feud. Milt McBriar, head of his clan, meets Bad Anse there and disclaims responsibility for Wyatt's attempt to kill Douglas. They declare a truce, under pressure from Good Anse Talbott. Juanita thinks she finds that Bad Anse is opposing her efforts to buy land and build a school. Milt McBriar breaks the truce by having Fletch McNash murdered. Jeb McNash begs Bad Anse to tell him who killed his father, but is not told. Juanita and Bad Anse further misunderstand each other. Bad Anse is bitter.

CHAPTER X—Continued.

"I'm grateful for this teacher's course," said Juanita hotly, "and I'm not going home."

Anse Havey went on:

"But I know that boy. I know that if I'd talked thataway he'd just about have gone out in the la'rel an' got somebody. Hit might not 'a' been the right feller, and he might have found that out later. I reckon ye never had a father murdered, did ye?"

"Hardly," answered the girl with a scornful toss of her head. "You see, I wasn't reared among gun-fighters."

"Well, I have," responded the man. "I was in the legislature down at Frankfort when it happened, a-helpin' to make the laws that govern this state. I was fer them laws in theory—but when that word came I paired off with a Republican, so's not to lose my vote on the floor, an' I come back here to these hills an' got that feller. I reckon I ought to be ashamed to tell ye that, but I'm so plumb ign'rant that I can't feel it. I knew how Jeb felt an' so I held him off with a promise to wait. Of course ye couldn't accept the help of a man like that."

He turned and withdrew his hands from his pockets.

"I'm through," he added, "an' I'm obleeged to ye fer harkenin' to me."

"There is something in your point of view, Mr. Havey," she acknowledged. "But it is all based on twisted and distorted principle.

"I don't think myself a saint. I guess I'm pretty weak. My first appeal to you was pure weakness. But I stand for ideas that the world has acknowledged to be right, and for that reason I am going to win. That is why, although I'm a girl, with none of your physical power, and no gun-fighters at my back, you are secretly afraid of me. That is why you are making unfair war on me. I stand for the implacable force of civilization that must sooner or later sweep you away and utterly destroy your dominance."

For the first time Bad Anse Havey's face lost its impassiveness. His eyes clouded and became puzzled, surprised.

"I reckon I don't hardly follow ye," he said. "If ye wants it to be enemies all right, but I ain't never made no war on ye. I don't make war on womenfolks, an' besides I wouldn't make a needless war nohow. All I've got to do is to give ye enough rope an' watch ye hang yourself."

"If you think that," she demanded, with a quick upleaping of anger in her pupils, "why did you feel it necessary to prevent my buying land? Why do you coerce your vassals, under fear of death, to decline my offers? Why, if my school means no menace, do you refuse it standing room to start its flight?"

The man's pose stiffened.

"Who told ye I'd hindered anybody from sellin' ye land?"

"Wherever I inquire it is the same thing. They must ask permission of Bad Anse Havey before they can do as they wish with their own."

"By heaven, that's another lie," he said shortly. "But I reckon ye believe that, too. I did advise folks hereabouts against sellin' to strangers, but that was afore ye come."

He paced the length of the room a while, then halted before her.

"Some of that property," he went on, and this time his voice was passionate in its earnestness, "has enough coal an' timber on it to make its owners rich some day. Have ye seen any of the coal-minin' sections of these hills? Well, go an' have a look. Ye won't find any mountaineer richer fer the development. Ye'll find 'em plundered an' cheated an' robbed of their homes by your civilized furriner. I've done aimed ter pertect my folks against bein' looted. I aims to go on pertectin' 'em."

"Ignorance won't protect them," she insisted.

"I told ye we was distrustful of furriners," went on Havey. "Some day there'll be a bigger war here than the Havey-McBriar war. Ye've seen somethin' of that. That other war will be with your people, an' when it comes there won't be any Mc-Briars or Haveys. We'll all be mountaineers standin' together an' holdin' what God gave us. God knows I hate Milt McBriar an' his tribe—hate 'em with all the power of hatin' that's in me—an' I'm a mountain man. But Milt's people an' my people have one thing in common. We're mountain men, an' these hills are ourn. We have the same killin' instinct when men seek to rob us. We want to be let alone, an' if we fight amongst ourselves it ain't nothin' to the way we'll fight, shoulder to shoulder an' back to back, against the robbers from down below."

The man paused, and as Juanita looked into his blazing eyes she shuddered, for it seemed that the killing instinct of which he spoke was burning there. She thought of nothing to say, and he continued:

"It's war betwen families now—but when your people come—come to buy for nothin' and fatten on our starvation, we men of the mountains will forget that, an' I reckon we'll fight together like all damnation against the rest. Thet's why I'm counselin' folks not to sell heedless."

"Then you did not forbid your people to sell to me?" inquired the girl.

"Why, in heaven's name, should I make war on ye?" he suddenly demanded. "Does a man fight children? We don't fight the helpless up here in the hills."

"Possibly," she suggested with a trace of irony, "when you learn that I'm not so helpless you won't be so merciful."

"We'll wait till that time comes," said the man shortly. He paused for a moment, then went on: "Helpless! Why, heaven knows, ma'am, I pity ye. Can't ye see what odds ye're contendin' against? Can't ye see that ye're fightin' God's hills and sandstone an' winds an' thunder? Can't ye see ye're tryin' ter take out of men's veins the fire in their blood—the fire that's been burnin' there for two centuries? Ye're like a little child tryin' ter pull down a jail-house. Ye're singin' lullaby songs to the thunder. Yes, I feel right sorry fer ye, but I ain't a-fightin' ye."

"I'm doing none of those things," she answered with a defiant blaze in her eyes. "I'm only trying to show these people that their ignorance is not necessary; that it's only part of a scheme to keep them vassals. You talk about the wild, free spirit of the mountain men. I think that free men will listen to that argument."

Anse laughed.

"Change 'em!" he repeated, disregarding the slur of her last speech. "Why, if ye don't give it up and go back to your birds that pick at berries, do you know what will happen to ye? I'll tell ye. Thar will be a change, but it won't be in us. It'll be in you. You'll be mountainized.

"Ye can't live where the storms come from an' where the rivers are born an' not have their spirit get into your blood. Ye may think ye're in partners with God, but I reckon ye'll find the hills are bigger than you be. How much land do ye need?"

"Why?"

"Because I aim to see ye get it. Ye say I'm scaired of ye. I aim to show ye how much I'm scaired. I aim to let ye go your own fool way an' flounder in your own quicksand. An' if nobody won't sell ye what ye want let me know an', by Almighty God, I'll make ye a free gift of a farm an' I'll build your school myself. Thet's how much I'm scaired of ye. I've tried to be friends with ye, an' ye won't have it. Now just go as fur as ye feels inclined an' see how much I mind ye."

He turned abruptly on his heel and went out, quietly closing the door behind him.

CHAPTER XI.

That summer Juanita's cabin rose on the small patch of ground bought from the Widow Everson, for in these hills the raising of a house is a simple thing which goes forward subject to no delays of striking workmen or balking contractors. The usual type, with its single room, may be reared in a few days by volunteers who turn their labor into a frolic. She had owed much to Jerry Everson and to Good Anse Talbott, for had her building force been solidly of Havey or McBriar complexion the school would henceforth have stood branded, in native eyes, a feud institution.

But Good Anse and Jerry, who were tolerated by both factions, and were gifted with a rough-hewn diplomacy, had known upon whom to call, even while they had seemed to select at random.

The cabin had been finished just before the news came of the death of Fletch McNash, and Jerry Everson had gone over with her to survey and admire it.

As he stood under the newly laid roof, sniffing the fresh, woody fragrance of the green timbers, he produced from under his coat what looked like a giant powder-horn. He had scraped and polished it until it shone like varnish, and he hung it by its leather thong above the hearth.

"What is it for, Jerry?" demanded the girl, and with that he took it down again and set it to his lips and blew.

A mellow sound, not loud, but far-carrying, like the fox-hunter's tally-ho, floated over the valley.

"Our house hain't more than a whoop an' a holler away," he said awkwardly, "but when ye're livin' over hyar by yoreself, ef ye ever wants anything in ther nighttime, jest blow thet horn."

After she had almost burst her cheeks with effort, he added: "Don't never blow this signal onless ye wants ter raise merry hell."

Then he imitated very low, through pursed lips, three long blasts and three short ones.

"What's that signal?" she demanded.

"Ye've heered the McBriar yell," he told her. "Thet horn calls ther Havey rallyin' signal. When thet goes out every Havey thet kin tote a gun's got ter git up an' come. Hit means war."

"Thank you, Jerry. I won't call the Haveys to battle."

The night after she had flung her challenge down to Bad Anse Havey Juanita stayed at the McNash cabin to be with Dawn and the widow. The next day she went with them to the mountainside "buryin'-ground," where Good Anse performed the last rites for the dead.

After it was all over, and it had been decided that the widow was to take the younger children up Meeting-house fork to live with a brother, the missionary and the teacher started back. Jeb was to stay here alone to run the farm, and when Juanita returned to the ridge Dawn went with her.

They were passing a tumbling waterfall, shrunken now to a trickling rill, when Dawn broke the long silence.

"Wunst, when I war a leetle gal," she said, "Unc' Perry war a-hiding out up thet branch from ther revenuers. I used ter fotch his victuals up thar ter him."

Juanita turned suddenly with a shocked expression. It was as if her little songbird friend had suddenly and violently reverted; as if the flower had turned to poison weed. And as Juanita looked Dawn's eyes were blazing and Dawn's face was as dark as her black hair—dark with the same expression which brooded on her brother's brow.

"What is it, dear?" Juanita asked, and in tense and fiery voice the younger girl exclaimed:

"I wishes I war a man. I wouldn't wait and set still like Jeb's doin'. By heaven, I'd git thet murderer. I'd cut his heart outen his body."

"I tole ye," quietly commented Brother Anse, "thet ther instinct's in ther blood. Anse Havey went down ter Frankfort an' set in ther legislater—but he come back ther same man thet went down. Somethin' called him. Somethin' calls ter every mountain man thet goes away, an' he harkens ter ther call."

"Anse come back," repeated Dawn triumphantly. "An' Anse is hyar. Ef Jeb sets thar an' don't do nothin', I

"Who Told You I Hindered Anybody From Selling You Land?"

reckon Anse Havey won't hardly let hit go by without doin' nothin'. Thank heaven, thar's some men left in ther hills like Anse Havey—but ef Jeb don't do nothin' I'll do hit myself."

Again Juanita shuddered, but it was not the time for argument, and so she went on, bitterly accusing Havey in her heart for his wizard hold on these people—a hold which incited them to bloodshed as the fanatical priests of the desert urge on their wild tribesmen.

She did not know that Bad Anse Havey went every few days over to the desolated cabin and often persuaded the boy to ride home with him and spend a part of the time in his larger brick house. She did not know that Bad Anse was coming nearer to lying than he had ever before come in withholding his strong suspicions from the boy because of his unwillingness to incite another tragedy.

So when one day a McBriar henchman by the name of Luke Thixton had left the mountains and gone west, Anse hoped that this man would stay away for a long while, and he refrained from mentioning to Jeb that now, when the bird had flown, he knew definitely of his guilt.

While Dawn, under the guidance of her preceptress, was making the acquaintance of a new and sweeter life, whose influences fed her imagination and fired her quick ambition, her brother was more solemnly being molded by the Havey chief.

The water-mill of old Bob McGreegor was the nearest spot to the dwelling of Bad Anse Havey where grist could be ground to meal, and sometimes when Jeb came over to the brick house he would volunteer to throw upon his shoulders the sack of corn and plod with it up across the ridges. He would sit there in the dusty old mill while the slow wheel groaned and creaked and the cumbersome millstones did their slow stint of work.

So one day, toward the end of August, Juanita, who had climbed up the path to the poplar to look over her battlefield and renew her vows, saw Jeb sturdily plodding his way in long, resolute strides through the woods toward the mill, a heavy sack upon his shoulders and a rifle swinging at his side.

That day chance had it that no one else had come to mill and Bob McGreegor had persuaded the boy to drink from the "leetle blue kag" until his mind was ripe for mischief. While the mill slowly ground out his meal Jeb McNash sat on a pile of rubbish in the gloomy shack, nursing his knees in interlocked fingers. Old Bob drank and stormed and cursed the inertia of the present generation. The lad's lean fingers tautened and gripped themselves more tensely and his eyes began to smolder and blaze with a wicked light as he listened.

"Ye looks like a right stand-up sort of a boy, Jeb," growled the old fire-eater who had set more than a few couples at each other's throats. "An' I reckon hit's all right, too, fer a feller ter bide his time, but hit 'pears ter me like ther men of these days don't do nothin' but bide thar time."

"I won't bide mine no longer than what I has ter," snapped the boy. "Anse 'lows ter tell me when he finds out who hit war thet got my pap. Thet's all I needs ter know."

Old Bob shook his head knowingly and laughed in his tangled beard.

"I reckon Anse Havey'll take his leisure. He's got other fish to fry. He's a-thinkin' 'bout bigger things than yore grievance, son."

The boy rose, and his voice came very quietly and ominously from suddenly whitened lips. "What does ye mean by thet, Uncle Bob?"

"Mebby I don't mean nothin' much. Then ergin mebby I could give ye a pretty good idee who kilt yore pap. Mebby I could tell ye 'bout a feller—a feller thet hain't fur removed from Old Milt hisself—thet went snoopin' crost ther ridge ther same day yore pap died with a rifle-gun 'crost his elbow and his pockets strutty with ca'tridges."

"Who war he?" came the tense demand with the sudden snap of rifle-fire. "Who war thet feller?"

Old Bob filled and lighted his pipe with fingers that had grown unsteady from the ministration of the "leetle blue kag." He laughed again in a drunken fashion.

"Ef Bad Anse Havey don't 'low ter tell ye, son," he artfully demurred, "I reckon hit wouldn't hardly be becomin' fer me ter name his name."

The boy picked up his battered hat.

"Give me my grist," he said shortly. He stood by, breathing heavily but silently while the sack was being tied, then, putting it down by the door, he wheeled and faced the older man.

"Now ye're a-goin' ter tell me what I needs ter know," he said quietly, "or I'm a-goin' ter kill ye whar ye stands."

Uncle Bob laughed. He had meant all the while to impart that succulent bit of information, which was no information at all, but mischief-making suspicion. He had held off only to infuriate and envenom the boy with the cumulative force of climax.

"Hit warn't nobody but—" After a pause he went on, "but old Milt McBriar's own son, Young Milt."

"Thet's all," said Jeb soberly; "I'm obleeged ter ye."

He went out with the sack on his shoulders and the rifle under his arm, but when he had reached a place in the woods where a blind trail struck back he deposited his sack carefully under a ledge of overhanging rock, for the clouds were mounting and banking now in a threat of rain and it was not his own meal, so he must be careful of its safety.

Then he crossed the ridge until he came to a point where the thicket grew down close and tangled to the road. He had seen Young Milt going west along that road this morning and by nightfall he would be riding back. The gods of chance were playing into his hands.

So he lay down, closely hugging the earth, and cocked his rifle. For hours he crouched there with unspeakable patience, while his muscles cramped and his feet and hands grew cold under the pelting of a rain which was strangely raw and chilling for the season. The sun sank in an angry bank of thunder-heads and the west grew lurid. The drenching downpour blinded him and trickled down his spine under his clothes, but at last he saw the figure he awaited riding a horse he knew. It was the same roan mare that Bad Anse had restored to Milt McBriar.

When young Milt rode slowly by, fifty yards away, with his mount at a walk and his reins hanging, he was untroubled by any anxiety, because he was in his own territory and was at heart fearless. The older boy from Tribulation felt his temples throb and the rifle came slowly up and the one eye which was not closed looked point-blank across immovable sights and along a steady barrel into the placid face of his intended victim.

He could see the white of Milt's eye and the ragged lock of hair under the hat-brim which looked like a smudge of soot across his brow. Then slowly Jeb McNash shook his head. A spasm of battle went through him and shook him like a convulsion to the soles of his feet. He had but to crook his finger to appease his blood-lust—and break his pledge.

"I done give Anse my hand ter bide my time 'twell I war dead sartain," he told himself. "I hain't quite dead sartain," he told himself. "I hain't quite dead sartain yit. I reckon I've got ter wait a spell."

He uncocked the rifle and the other boy rode on, but young Jeb folded his arms on the wet earth and buried his face in them and sobbed, and it was an hour later that he stumbled to his feet and went groggily back, drunk with bitterness and emotion, toward the house of Anse Havey. Yet when he arrived after nightfall his tongue told nothing and his features told less.

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Juanita, living in the cabin she had built with the girl who had become her companion and satellite, making frequent hard journeys to some house which the shadow of illness had invaded, found it hard to believe that this life had been hers only a few months. Suspense seemed to stretch

The Rifle Came Slowly Up.

weeks to years, and she awoke each new day braced to hear the news of some fresh outbreak, and wondered why she did not. A few neighborhood children were already learning their rudiments, and plans for more buildings were going forward.

Sometimes Jeb came over from the brick house to see his sister, and on the boy's face was always a dark cloud of settled resolve. If Juanita never questioned him on the topic that she knew was nearest his heart it was because she realized that to do so would be the surest way to estrange his friendship and confidence.

In one thing she had gained a point. She had bought as much property as she should need. Back somewhere behind the veil of mysteries Anse Havey had pressed a button or spoken a word, and all the hindrance that had lain across her path straightway evaporated. Men had come to her, with no further solicitation on her part, and now it seemed that many were animated by a desire to turn an honest penny by the sale of land. In every conveyance that was drawn—deeds of ninety-nine-year lease instead of sale—she read a thrifty and careful knowledge of land laws and reservation of mineral and timber rights which she traced to the head of the clan.

As summer spent itself there was opportunity for felling timber, and the little sawmill down in the valley sent up its drone and whine in proclamation that her trees were being turned into squared timbers for her buildings.

Once, when Milt McBriar rode up to the sawmill, he found the girl sitting there, her hands clasped on her knees, gazing dreamily across the sawdust and confusion of the place.

"Ye're right smart interested in thet thar woodpile, hain't ye, ma'am?" he inquired with a slow, benevolent smile.

His kindliness of guise invited confidence, and there was no one else within earshot, so the girl looked up, her eyes a little misty and her voice impulsive.

"Mr. McBriar," she said, "every one of those timbers means part of a dream to me, and with every one of them that is set in place will go a hope and a prayer."

He nodded sympathetically. "I reckon," he said, "ye kin do right smart good, too."

"Mr. McBriar," she flashed at him in point-blank questioning, "since I came here I have tried to be of use in a very simple and ineffective fashion. I have done what little I could for the sick and distressed, yet I am constantly being warned that I'm not allowed to carry on my work. Do you know of any reason why I shouldn't go ahead?"

He gazed at her for a moment, quizzically, then shook his head.

"Oh, pshaw!" he exclaimed, "I wouldn't let no sich talk es thet fret me none. Folks round hyar hain't got much ter do except ter gossip 'round. Nobody hain't a-goin' ter hinder ye. We hain't such bad people, after all."

After that she felt that from the McBriars she had gained official sanction, and her resentment against Anse Havey grew because of his scornful ungraciousness.

The last weeks of the summer were weeks of drought and plague. Ordinarily, in the hills storms brew swiftly and frequently and spend themselves in violent outpourings and cannonading of thunder, but that year the clouds seemed to have dried up, and down in the tablelands of the Blue Grass the crops were burned to worthless stalk and shrunken ear. Even up here, in the birthplace of waters, the corn was brown and sapless, so that when a breeze strayed over the hillside fields they sent up a thirsty, dying rasp of rattling whisper.

It was not only in the famished forests and seared fields that the hot breath of the plague breathed, carrying death in its fetid nostrils. Back in the cabins of the "branch-water folks," where little springs diminished and became polluted, all those who were not strong enough to throw off the touch of the specter's finger sickened and died, and typhoid went in and out of Havey shack and McBriar cabin whispering, "a pest on both your houses."

The widow McNash had not been herself since the death of Fletch. She who had once been so strong over her drudgery, sat day long on the doorstep of her brother's hovel and, in the language of her people, "jest sickened an' pined away."

So, as Juanita Holland and Good Anse Talbott rode sweating mules about the hills, receiving calls for help faster than they could answer them, they were not astonished to hear that the widow was among the stricken. Though they fought for her life, she refused to fight herself, and once again the Eastern girl stood with Dawn in the brier-choked "buryin'-ground," and once more across an open grave she met the eyes of the man who stood for the old order.

But now she had learned to set a lock on her lips and hold her counsel. So, when she met Anse and Jeb afterward, she asked without rancor: "May I take little Jesse back with me, too? He's too young," she added, with just a heartsick trace of her old defiance, "to be useful to you, Mr. Havey, and I'd like to teach him what I can."

Anse and Jeb conferred, and the elder man came back and nodded his head.

"Jesse can go back with ye," he said. "I'm still aimin' to give ye all the rope ye wants. When ye've had enough an' quits, let me know, an' I'll take care of Fletch's children."

And on her farm, as folks called Juanita's place, that September saw many changes. Near the original cabin was springing up a new structure, larger than any other house in that neighborhood, except, possibly, the strongholds of the chiefs, and as it grew and began to take form it imparted an air of ordered trimness to the countryside about it. It was fashioned in such style as should be in keeping with its surroundings and not give too emphatic a note of alien strangeness.

Juanita wished that her cabin could house more occupants, for the plague had left many motherless families, and many children might have come into her fold. As it was, she had several besides the McNashes as her nucleus, and while the weather held good she was rushing her work of timber-felling and building which the winter would halt.

CHAPTER XII.

One day in early October young Milt McBriar happened upon Dawn and Juanita walking in the woods.

The gallant colors and the smoky mists of autumn wrapped the forests and brooded in the sky. An elixir went into the blood with each deep-drawn breath and set to stirring forgotten or hitherto unawakened emotions. And in this heady atmosphere of quickened pulses the McBriar boy halted and gazed at the Havey girl.

Juanita saw Young Milt's eyes flash with an awakened spirit. She saw a look in his face which she was woman enough to interpret even before he himself dreamed what its meaning might be.

Dawn was standing with her head up and her lids half closed looking across the valley to the Indian summer haze that slept in smoky purple on the ridges. She wore a dress of red calico, and she had thrust in her belt a few crimson leaves from a gum tree and a few yellow ones from a poplar.

Juanita Holland did not marvel at the fascinated, almost rapt look that came into Young Milt's eyes, and Young Milt, too, as he stood there in the autumn woods, was himself no mean figure. His lean body was quick of movement and strong, and his bronzed face wore the straight-looking eyes that carried an assurance of fearless honesty. He had been away to Lexington to college and was going back. The keen intelligence of his face was marred by no note of meanness, and now, as he looked at the girl of the enemy, his shoulders came unconsciously erect with something of the pride that shows in men of wild blood when they feel in their veins the strain of the chieftains.

But Dawn, after her first blush, dropped her lids a little and tilted her chin, and without a word snubbed him with the air of a Havey looking down on a McBriar.

Milt met that gaze with a steady one of his own and banteringly said: "Dawn, 'pears like ye mought 'a' got tangled up with a rainbow."

Her voice was cool as she retorted: "I reckon that's better than gitting mixed up with some other things."

"I was jest a-thinkin', es I looked at ye," went on the boy gravely, "thet hit's better then gittin' mixed up with anything else."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

A man may deliver a convincing barroom oration concerning a free country, and then be required to put his money on the counter before being served.